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ABSTRACT

The Dutch Open University accepted its first students in September 1984 after a two-year preparation period. Like its British counterpart, the Dutch Open University offers free access and has no requirements as far as previous education is concerned. Its principal aims are to (1) provide higher education for adults either as a second chance (for those who were unable to avail themselves of higher education when they were young) or as a second route (for those who have chosen to combine a paying job or household work with study) and (2) stimulate innovation in higher education from the standpoints of programming, content, and methodology. Although it is an autonomous institution, the Dutch Open University relies on cooperation with other institutions for about 50 percent of its course development. Despite the many problems that the Dutch Open University encountered since its inception, it appears to have earned itself a permanent position within the higher education system. In little more than two years it has enrolled more than 35,000 adults in more than 70,000 courses. More than 70 percent of the Dutch population has heard of the Dutch Open University and has a fairly accurate idea of the services that it offers. The Dutch Open University prides itself on its methodological and technical innovations in the area of distance education, and has made important innovations in the processes of selecting instructional media (by using a team approach), developing and presenting written materials, determining the most appropriate role for computers in distance education, and focusing on the teacher's role as a tutor and stimulator of the learning process rather than as a carrier of information. The Dutch Open University has managed to offer its students a diversified range of program options and has emphasized modularization and differentiation. (MN)

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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF THE NETHERLANDS: 'SERVING THE ADULT LEARNER' BY DISTANCE EDUCATION AND 'INNOVATING HIGHER EDUCATION'

1 Introduction: the Dutch Open University

After a two-year preparation period, the Dutch Open University started in September 1984; the first students received their course material from queen Beatrix personally. The opening was the culmination of a discussion which had stretched from 1970 and had concentrated on ideals such as higher education for everybody, lifelong education, reprogramming of higher education, democratization of education, methodical improvements through the use of new media, etc. Much of the inspiration was found in the example of the British Open University. In 1977, a planning committee was formed, whose 1979 recommendations, together with a ministerial note, were discussed by Parliament in 1980. In 1981, permission was granted for the establishment of the Ou and at the end of 1984 the Dutch Parliament passed the Open University Act. (See for these backgrounds: The main features of the Ou, 1978; The establishment of an Ou in the Netherlands, 1980; De Moor, 1983; van Eesteren-Smith, 1984.)

The Netherlands now rank amongst the countries which have established relatively independent institutes of higher education or universities for adult students, with their own students, their own graduation certificates, and primarily using distance education. The examples were set by, among others, South Africa (UNISA), Great Britain (OU), the German Federal Republic (Fernuniversität), Canada (Athabasca University and Open learning Institute), Israel (Everyman's University) and Spain (UNED). It is not the most recent one; at the same time or shortly after the Dutch Ou, distance teaching universities were set up in countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, with preparations forging ahead in Portugal. In addition, there are similar initiatives in Italy, Denmark, Norway, etc., where a number of institutes of higher education and/or correspondence education cooperate in the form of a consortium, in an attempt to offer adults the opportunity for advanced studies. Over the last decade we have also seen the emergence of departments of distance education at the traditional universities, in countries like Sweden, Australia, France and the U.S.A.; one specific example to be mentioned here is Deakin University in Australia, which started both as a new regional campus university and a university for distance education (dual-mode university).

What is the place of the Dutch Ou in the world of higher adult education? Each of the institutions has its own specific characteristics. The Dutch Ou distinguishes itself because of the following features:

a. As well as offering freedom of choice where place and time of studying are concerned (the primary characteristic of distance education), the Dutch Ou, like the British Ou, offers free access: there are no formal requirements as to previous education. In addition there are two more ways in which the student is free to

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choose, a situation unparalleled - as far as we know - except at the Athabasca University in Canada: a high degree of freedom in pacing and in composition of the programme, allowing, students to combine relevant courses into study packages or particular official certificates.

b. The official aims of the Ou, as phrased by the Government, include: providing higher education for adults, either as a second chance (for those who, for social, cultural, of economic reasons, were unable to avail themselves (fully) of higher education when they were young), or as an second route (for those who prefer to combine a paying job or household work with a study), but also explicitly the stimulation of innovation in higher education as to programming, content, and methodology.

c. The Ou is an independent institution. This was a deliberate choice, based on an intensive discussion in 1978/79, because it was feared that the four fundamental educational characteristics, as well as the focus on adults and the innovative potential, would be insufficiently guaranteed if the Ou was linked to one or more of the 13 other Dutch universities. So the Ou is an autonomous university. It is necessary, however, to subdivide the category of autonomous distance teaching universities which we often find as one of the main categories of institutions of higher distance education for adults (e.g. Keegan, 1986). We can distinguish:
   - autonomous institutions with their own students, their own certificates and their own academic staff, e.g. the British Ou, the German Fernuniversität and the Canadian Athabasca University;
   - autonomous institutions which have their own students and deliver certificates but with an academic staff merely acting as a coordinating, correcting and evaluating body for materials and courses obtained from other institutions, as is mainly the case with the Open Learning Institute in Richmond/Vancouver, Canada;
   - and in between these, the autonomous institutions which have their own students and certificates but are largely dependent on and seek cooperation with other institutions, for reasons such as (preservation of) flexibility, the opportunity to cover many academic disciplines and the opportunity to be innovative outside the institution. The Dutch Ou relies on the cooperation with other institutes of higher education for about 50% (the academic staff) of its course development. A similar model is envisaged in Portugal.

2 The innovative task

Innovation of higher and adult education was not merely considered to be a possible positive side-effect, but explicitly stated as one of the tasks of the Dutch Ou. This aim was one of the reasons for the decision to establish the Ou as a relatively autonomous institute, working closely together, however, with other institutes of higher education. Particular emphasis was given to the application of new technology: computer and information technology.

Before we attempt a (first) evaluation of the achievements of the past two and a half years, we will give an overview of this innovative task. It divides into four parts:

a) The first innovative objective is, of course, the above-mentioned aim of the Ou of providing higher education for adults. Until 1984 there was still occasional doubt in not unimportant political and social circles whether the actual need for higher education among adults justified the establishment of a separate university. Despite some initiatives (e.g. between 1890 and 1910 towards university extension) and despite the growing number of so-called 'working students' since about 1950, the Dutch universities had failed to take the explicit and separate responsibility for older students. The question was whether there would be a demand for the services of the Ou which was not already or which could not be fulfilled by the existing universities. As late as 1986, a publication (by an official of the Department of Education and Science) stated that, with an adaptation of the entry requirements, the perfect system of small-scale and fine-meshed distribution of university education should be able to provide for adult students, eliminating the need for a separate Ou: almost everybody is within an hour's reach of a university.

b) The second part of the innovative task is the development of new teaching methods: methods which guarantee freedom of choice as to place and time of study as well as freedom of pacing, with the specific aim of reaching new groups of adult students. The question was whether any additional methodological innovations could be made in higher education to those of the preceding decades, such as to the long-established correspondence courses and the educational broadcasting services.

c) Besides methodological innovations - but closely connected with these - there are the innovations regarding the content. In the 60s and 70s, ideas had been put forward to bring university and higher vocational education more in line with each other, or even to integrate the two. Higher education was to adapt its programmes more to suit the demands from society. The increasing specialization in the disciplines was to be balanced by a more problem-orientated type of education. If the aim was to reach new groups of students (adults), methodological innovations would not suffice; the contents of the programmes would have to consider the needs, possibilities and experiences of these students.

d) These innovations were not only to be realized within the Ou itself: the Ou was also to promote the introduction of these innovations in other institutes of higher education. Various strategies were open: to other universities the Ou was and is sometimes a partner, at other times it is an example or a competitor.

3 An interim evaluation after two and a half years

Is 1987 too soon a date to see to which extent the Ou has achieved its innovative tasks? The answer could never be more than an interim evaluation. It takes about 10 years before graduates from the first generation of students at a university institute of distance education have presented themselves to society in a sufficiently profound way and for a long enough period. Innovations in education, particularly in

higher education, are brought about slowly. In addition, the Dutch Ou has experienced a number of starting problems, the most important of which are:

- the budgetary measures. The initial government budget as projected in 1980 was slashed by almost half in the following years as a result of the economic crisis and government cuts. At the same time, government raised the entrance fees for students, in an attempt to provide extra finances; the effectiveness of this measure is open to doubt. The Ou itself had hardly any room to move, while the tasks remained the same.
- a premature start. Political circumstances or the assessment thereof prompted a launch in September 1984, when the course authors had barely had one year to produce the material. The transition from the preparation and setting-up of this enterprise, with all kinds of recruitment problems and the need for independent development of an executive framework, into the fully operative phase proceeded too fast and the first phase continued to influence the next one. Course production and service to the students became acutely problematic in 1985.
- the tension between the business side and the academic side. More than any other institute of higher education does the Ou, as an institute of distance education, bear the characteristics of a business enterprise: it is based on job-sharing, has many external relations, a project-based structure, and production orientation. The necessary business attitude can only be built up gradually with people to be recruited from the academic world of universities with their ivory towers and a different approach to responsibilities.
- too many tasks at the same time. The Ou received and accepted too many tasks at the same time. It was to provide education to its students as soon as possible and be innovative as well. The objective was not merely to be a university, but an institute with a varied and new range of courses covering the entire field of higher education; at that stage it was still acquiring its academic status. It was decided to start a range of programmes in no fewer than seven wide subject matter areas (faculties) concurrently - one of which was entirely new in The Netherlands - instead of a gradual expansion. Although this meant that everything was at least there in its nucleus right form the start, there was no accompanying strategy for development, and consequently the risks were high.

By 1987, however, in spite of all these problems the Ou in The Netherlands appears to have earned itself a permanent position within the system of higher education. Undoubtedly there will be many financial problems to be overcome this year and in 1988, and the course production is still behind schedule, but the achievements are such that we can safely speak of a success. Below we shall focus in more detail on these achievements.

4 Achievements of the Ou

4.1 New students

The most remarkable achievement is undoubtedly that, in spite of the starting problems, the Ou has managed over little more than two years to enrol more than 35,000 adults, enlisting in a total of more than 70,000 courses. At this moment over 25,000 of these are still involved with one or more of these courses. Over this period, more than 200,000 people in The Netherlands requested and received information on the Ou. More than 70% of the Dutch population has heard of the Ou and has a more or less accurate idea of this new institute. There is no doubt about the need. In 1981, when a decision was to be taken concerning the establishment, there was still some - some said too optimistic - speculation on an initial intake of 3,000 students and a total number of 30,000 students after ten years. A few months before the opening, the number of 13,000 students was not accepted for the accounts; half a year later, there were circa 20,000. It now looks like each year will see 10,000 new students enlisting for at least one course. (See also van Enckevort, 1984 and 1985.)

As far as numbers of students are concerned, the group that has been reached is large. The composition of this group is unique too:
- They are adult students: the average age is about 32 years. Almost 37% is under 30 years; more than 8% is over 50 years.
- The percentage of women (33%), although lower than that of the present generation of first year students at other universities, is higher than the percentage of female students in comparable age groups and relatively high (compared to other universities) in the exact sciences.
- More than 70% of them have a paying, usually full-time, job.
- Although the comparison with other types of education (such as part-time or evening studies) is made more and more, many students opt for the Ou because they cannot go anywhere else: because of the entry requirements (11%), personal circumstances (33%), the need to be able to choose the place, time and pace of study (41%).

The figures presented here appear to suggest that the Ou has removed a number of obstacles regarding participation in higher education. Some comments should be added to this statement, though.

First of all, it has become clear that not all of these people are students in the strictest sense. It is the very accessibility of the Ou that invites many people from so-called risk groups: people who want to give it a try, who are merely interested in the materials and not in a certificate, people who need to be able to choose the place, time and rate of progress, but lack the self-descipline or circumstances to conduct self-study, and people who, from the start, are only interested in one or two courses and not in an entire programme. As a result the performance figures, calculated on the basis of the total number of enrolments, are low: no more than 40% take a second course, and it remains to be seen how many obtain a

university degree. These figures need not be alarming: on close comparison of the enrolment systems, the Athabasca University, the Fernuniversität, and even the British Ou show similar figures. (In the Dutch Ou almost every applicant, if paying the fee, becomes a student. In the UKOU only a limited number of the applicants is offerend a place and of this number about 25-40% do not accept the place; of the students who accept their place, about 25-30% do not progress beyond provisional registration. See Field, 1982; Into the 1990's, 1986.) A small chance of a university degree can be regarded as socially very important, if the alternative is no chance at all, and the numbers involved are still considerable. But the danger is always there of a fixation in public opinion on a low performance figure in terms of percentage.

Secondly, we must conclude that many students in distance education are not yet independent learners, even though the teaching method (guided self-study) presupposes this type of student. This observation has been made before, by Brookfield (Britain, 1982) and Willen (Sweden, 1984). Research on Ou students in The Netherlands too has shown that many students have problems organizing the learning process: a considerable number of them rely on external regulation, something they will, by definition, find very little of in the Ou system (Vermunt, 1987; Laros, 1987). The same goes for the need for social contacts with other students and tutors: a practically insoluble dilemma when the choice for the Ou is made because of the freedom as to place, time and composition of the programme.

Thirdly, we need to ask ourselves the question whether distance education meets the demands of those students who consider the study an independent critical exploration and acquisition of old and new knowledge, and not a passive absorbing and reproducing of knowledge. Or, as expressed after analyses by Harris and Holmes: 'Is it really surprising that a Mary (confronted with the busy and disciplined Martha), a Mary, who is looking for an academic education which can evolve from her own culture, interests and situation, will not enter or must compromise in her means of communication in order to stay in the system or will, according to the statistics, do relatively badly?' (Harris and Holmes, 1976; Van Enckevort, 1986)

4.2 New technologies and techniques

The application of new technological media in education, especially the computer, can hardly be regarded as specific innovation in and by the Ou. The computer plays an important role in the management information system, in the financial and student administrations and in word processing: organizationally the Ou may well be ahead of all institutes of higher education in this respects. This is less true when it comes to educational applications. The Ou has neither the financial means nor the time to achieve real innovation in hardware and software. Nevertheless, there are some innovations in the application of new technologies and other media.

In the first place there is the selection process and the decisional procedures concerning the application of the media. Although not restricted to the Dutch Ou, they are on the whole fairly unique for the new distance education universities (Gastkemper and Van Enckevort, 1984). For each phase of the preparation, planning and development of the curricula a careful consideration is made of the use and presentation of the different media. The course team model, comprising educational technologists, and the associated method of course development contribute at least as much to the innovation as the selected media themselves.

In the second place, during this evaluation of the media, the importance of the 'old media' presents itself increasingly stronger, for a number of reasons. Less imaginative and hardly generating any publicity, one of the most important methodological innovations in education achieved by the Ou is nevertheless the presentation of the written material: the uniformity and recognizable style, the structure of textbooks, the page layout with a balanced use of margin columns, the illustrations, etc. This has constituted an important step from 'study books' (which can be used in teacher-induced education or as additional material) to 'written materials for self-study'. This has proved a difficult transition for writers of course materials. Students usually rate the written materials higher than any other part of the course. Something similar should also be achieved for the use of the telephone as a medium of communication between students and between students and tutors.

In the third place, there is the observation that amongst the new media the computer is changing its role as a medium of instruction (simulations, exercises, tests) and information carrier to that of part of a communication network. In this respect the Dutch Ou has recently started an experiment, called Tele-Education, together with a large publisher, the national telephone services (PTT) and Philips. Students receive a 'learning station' at home (consisting of a computer, a monitor, a printer and a modem) which allows them to get access to a network of students, tutors, the central Ou computer and the memocom-service of the PTT. By means of this network programs are distributed to the students directly; while at home, students can take part in simulation games and workshops, or call up tests to assess their progress; but more important, they can communicate with tutors and other students, either directly or by sending messages and questions to be answered later. This avoids the need for a trip to the study centre (as in the Cyclops experiment at the British Ou) or the presence of a group (as mostly in Teleconferencing). This way a number of disadvantages of distance education are overcome without sacrificing any of the advantages such as the freedom to choose the place and time of study (Cfr. Bates, 1986).

A fourth aspect of the methodological-technical innovation is closely connected with this development: the new role of the teacher. He learns to be increasingly less the carrier of

information, but more and more the tutor, who stimulates and promotes a communication process between himself and the student and between student and the learning materials. Proper use of the media - written materials as well as computers and means of communication - enables tutors at the Ou to become what university teachers should be: not the ones who transmit other people's knowledge to others, but the ones who engage with the students in a critical assessment of knowledge bases to establish their truthfulness and applicability. Here too, we are merely at the beginning, but this approach may lead to a renewed integration of education and research instead of the separation within the universities between education on the one hand (for many) and research on the other (for the happy few).

4.3 New programmes and contents

During the preparations for the Ou, as mentioned above, there was a discussion in the field of higher education in The Netherlands, on a further amalgamation or even integration of university education and higher vocational training, on an adaptation of programmes to suit the demands from society and industry, and on a more problem-orientated and interdisciplinary approach. It was thought that an independent Ou would be able to achieve these aims sooner and better than the traditional universities. During the setting-up of the Ou, the freedom of choice as to the composition of the programme proved to meet the demands of the students. Moreover, the development of written material and the application of new information technology proved to provide the occasion and offer the actual possibilities for organizing the scientific knowledge bases of the various disciplines into separate units or modules. This had in fact two closely connected results:

a) Offering students the choice of different combinations. Students register for one course at a time. They can use this course to enrich their knowledge, as a (short) refresher course or to enlarge their educational basis. They can also achieve this by a combination of courses. There are regulations on the ways in which courses can be combined to obtain a university degree, equivalent to a degree from any other university, or a certificate of higher vocational education. This way they can also change their study plans without many problems; there are concrete intermediate perspectives.
b) A more diversified range of options. In several subject areas course development is planned with a number of complementary shells around a nucleus. One or a few courses constitute the nucleus, with a total study load of 200 to 500 hours. Around this nucleus there are a number of basic courses from which the student can choose. This will lead to the first short-cycle higher education programme of 800 to 1,000 hours. The next shell will contain several courses that allow the student to gain more in-depth knowledge or help him extend his skills. This results in a few short basic curricula of about 2,000 hours, each for more specialized professions or jobs. Finally, there is the option of further extension to a full certificate of university education:

by a horizontal extension of the short programmes, a more in-depth knowledge through more specialist courses and the carrying out of particular tasks. This brings the total study load to 5,400 hours. (See for a concrete example Kirschner and Mulder, 1987.)

The two latest keywords in higher education in The Netherlands, 'modularization' and 'differentiation', often associated with the ideal of recurrent education, have experienced their most pervasive realization at the Ou. But here too, we should add a few comments (Cfr. Abrahamsson, 1986).

Firstly, we should observe that an adaptation of the content to suit adults must go further: problem-orientated, thematic education, relevant to everyday practice, presupposes not only that students must be given the opportunity to choose from many options even during the course of their studies, but demands a different treatment of the subject matter as well. The disciplinary approach from the scientific achievements and the associated organization is one side. The other is the focussing on a problem from complementary and overlapping disciplines, using categories and classifications that adults work with and meet in their everyday life and work. Problem-orientated education goes beyond the use of recognizable examples. We must conclude that the few courses which have adopted this approach up to now, have been highly appreciated but not clearly successful attempts.

A second problem is the freedom of choice on the part of the student. Many students apparently find it difficult to choose and ask for clearer guidelines, pre-set patterns to finish a study in as short a period as possible: too much freedom of choice results in delays in this case. In some ways we should also fear a high degree of non-commitment. From the point of view of preservation of the academic quality this poses the problem of fragmentation and dilution.

In the third place, attention is drawn away from what is perhaps an even more important task: the incorporation of 'life experiences', 'experiential learning' or 'experiential knowledge' in the planning of the study. Adult education has the task not only to appeal to the needs and interests, but also the knowledge and competencies that adults have already acquired in a variety of ways. Distance education then, is not the only result of the principle of 'openness': as far as contents and didactic principles are concerned, these institutes should also provide the controlled granting of 'credits for experience' and 'portfolio assessment', as is done at American colleges such as the Empire State College (Saratoga Springs) and Thomas Edison College (Trenton). (Abrahamsson o.a., 1981; Simosko, 1986.)

4.4 The introduction of innovations at other universities

It will be interesting to see whether the Ou succeeds in bringing about the aforementioned innovations not only within its own institute but as well as transferring these to other institutes of higher education. An important condition was thought to be the temporary attachment of members of staff from other institutions to the Ou as professor or course writer or tutor: the cooperation model. Outline agreements were drawn up with a large number of institutions. The actual recruitment and employment of these people caused some problems: the Ou is situated rather eccentrically in the South of The Netherlands, new members of staff had to be introduced to the Ou system regularly, there were few opportunities to meet each other outside formal meetings, Ou courses had not (yet) been recognized as equivalent to scientific research publications (something that has become increasingly more important over the past few years) etc. Nevertheless dozens of teachers and professors form other institutions have been, and are still, involved on a temporary basis with the work at the Ou. This has contributed to the recognition of the Ou, but also to the transfer of innovations. Illustrative in this respect are the words form lecturers who have taught at their universities for years: 'my involvement with the Ou course forced me for the first time to think about what education actually is'. The effect of this cannot be easily overestimated. They went back also to their institutions with teaching materials and tools.

A second factor is the increasing requests from other institutes to use Ou materials. This has a direct effect, especially if the request originates in the appreciation of the Ou material (cfr. Moss ans Brew, 1981). There is also an indirect effect, in the sense that in other institutes there can be a more balanced co-existence of course elements for self-study (with the help of Ou material) and elements which receive detailed attention from the teacher. Especialy institutes of higher vocational training take advantage of this opportunity. In a number of cases this has led to cooperation agreements where the Ou provides part of the teaching programme for another institute, such as in the agricultural university.

The Ou can also stimulate innovations elsewhere in the capacity of a competitor. The modular structure of the curricula, the possibilities for differentiation, the establishment of a new subject area 'liberal arts', all these have set examples, also because the popularity did not go unnoticed.
This is illustrated by the fact that at least four other universities have recently started or announced courses in liberal arts. The Ou is frequently referred to when plans are drawn up for modular systems.

The diminishing numbers of traditional young students, partly as the result of the fading effect of the baby boom and the shorter university curriculum (lemited now to four years), as well as the

emergence of the Ou as a competitor have finally led to an increased interest in adult students from the traditional universities. Often this resulted in the hasty creation of programmes for part-time students, sometimes in a more serious way by the development of a special curriculum. This has led to a fourfold increase of first-year students in part-time courses between 1979 and 1985, a rise from 3.3% of all first-year students at the traditional universities to about 8%. In 1986 this amounted to about 3,000 students. Their age is distinctly lower than that of the Ou students: 60% is under 30 years old. Fortunately, the initial competition between traditional universities and the Ou does not prevent a later cooperation between them, something the Ministry will press for.

5 Conclusion

In spite of a few critical notes, the interim evaluation shows a positive result: from its position as an autonomous institute with the condition to cooperate with others, the Ou appears to succeed in attracting new groups of students and to achieve a number of innovations regards methods and contents of teaching in higher education, not only at the Ou itself, but also elsewhere. There could be a danger involved. There are those who now plead that the Ou should become first and foremost an institute for the development of courses and curricula for higher education. It must be feared that in that case the urge for conforming to the traditional curricula will become stronger than the need for real innovation. The innovative potential is best safeguarded when the Ou keeps its own adult students and concentrates in the first place on their needs, possibilities and experiences. A lot remains to be done here.

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